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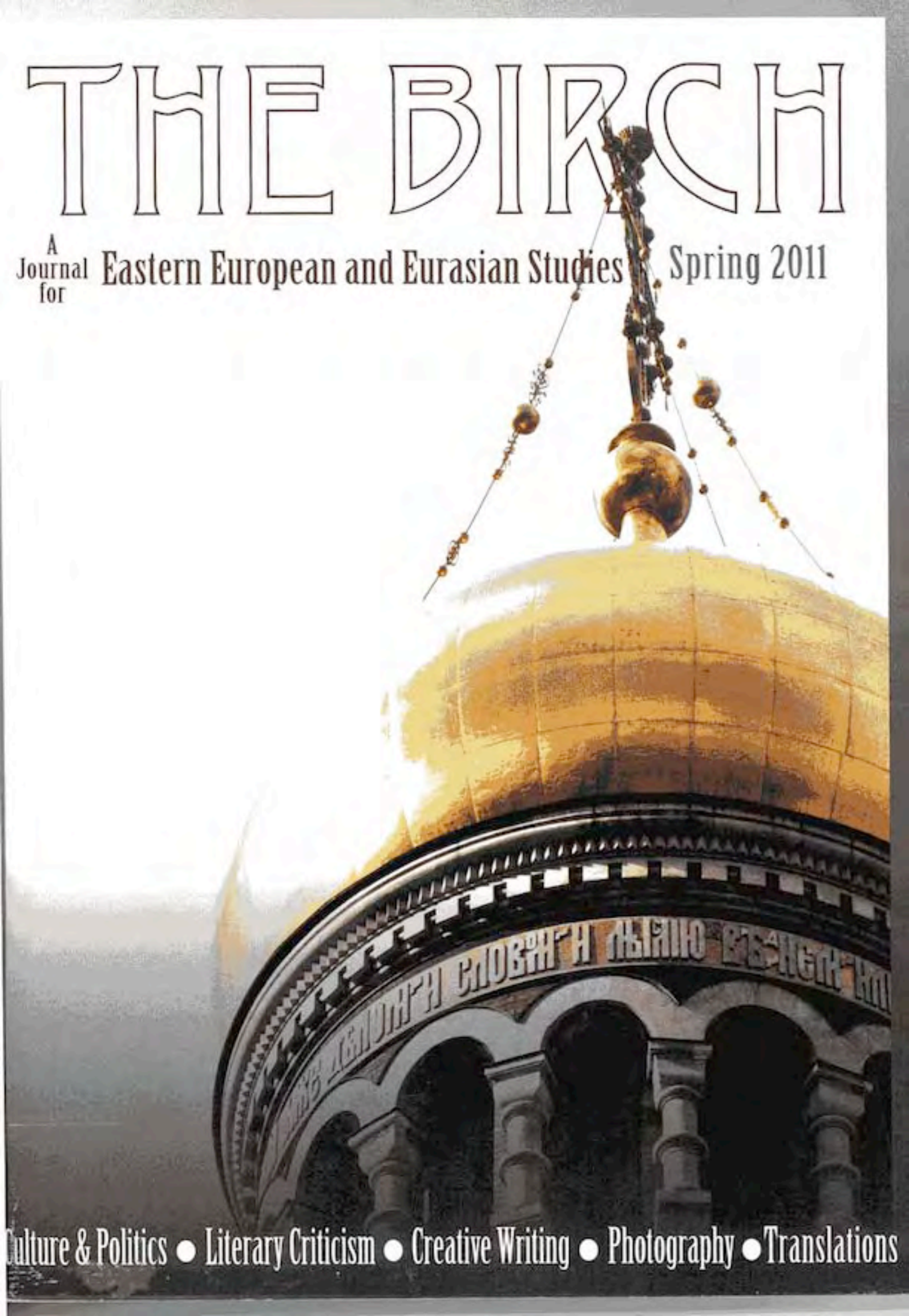

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Existential Questions and Stereotypes in *Rothschild's Fiddle*

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If I am not for my self, who is for me? If I am for my self then what am I? If not now, when?[1]

Though Chekhov's short story "Rothschild's Fiddle" seems to describe a cultural interaction between representations of Russian and Jewish culture through its main characters Yakov the Russian and Rothschild the Jew, the story complicates this binary by making Yakov a stereotypical Jew as well. Chekhov divides the stereotype into its external and internal parts; the gangly Rothchild embodies visible characteristics of a stereotypical Jew, while Yakov's miserliness exemplifies internal thoughts of the "greedy Jew." Through the interaction between these two stereotypes, Chekhov explores the interaction between two representations of the Jew.

Chekhov's study in stereotypes begins with Yakov's name. "Yakov Ivanov" combines the Jewish "Yaakov" (Jacob) with the Russian "Ivan" in his patronymic. From the moment he introduces Yakov, Chekhov places him in both groups. Yakov's miserliness makes him seem more like Shylock than a typical Russian. When he buries his wife Marfa, he focuses on the "losses" he could incur during the funeral. Yakov reflects that he "was very pleased that it was all so honorable, decent, cheap, and no offence to anyone. Bidding his last farewell to Marfa, he touched the coffin with his hand and thought, 'Fine work!'" (257). More concerned with the quality of the coffin's construction than its contents, Yakov's focus on the material overrides his emotional capacities. Yakov even uses his "chum" to reduce the "losses" he incurs for the funeral (257). Yakov's inside connection mirrors the sort of "secret financial network" that many European Jews were accused of using to exploit the peasantry of Western Europe.[2] Even though Yakov should not profit from his wife's death, he, like Shylock, chooses to take what he sees as rightfully his, no matter how morally questionable the gain might be.

Even after Marfa's death, Yakov's introspection is muddied by materialism;

his deepest regrets are financial rather than spiritual. As he sits by the river, Yakov thinks to himself,

But none of it had happened, even in dreams, his life had gone by without any benefit, without any enjoyment, had gone for nought, for a pinch of snuff; there was nothing left ahead, and looking back there was nothing but losses, and such terrible losses made you shudder (260).

Because his imagination has been swallowed by a calculating desire for a "pound of flesh", Yakov feels entrapped in a pointless universe that is nothing more than "a pinch of snuff". His financial "losses" make is such that he cannot even "dream" of a reality in which financial gain is second to emotional concerns. His failure to imagine keeps him mired in a world that had "gone for nought." The Jews of the ghetto and Pale of Settlement were accused of the same self-inflicted hopelessness.[3]

Yakov also follows religious laws similar to the restrictions followed by religious Jews. He refuses to work on religious holidays and on Monday, which he calls "the unlucky day" (254). Again, Yakov fits the stereotype of a Jew whose miserliness is combined, paradoxically, with a legal code that prohibits him from conducting business or handling money on several days throughout the year. Yakov reflects, "As a result in one year there was a total of about two hundred days when he had, willy-nilly, to sit with folded arms. And what a loss that was!" (254). The use of the word "willy-nilly" suggests that the narrator views these laws as arbitrary or anachronistic. Since Christianity provided a rationale for rejecting Mosaic law, some Christians viewed the Jewish legal codes in a similar light. Chekhov points out the irony in the stereotype of the miserly but lazy Jew when he explains that Christian holidays forced Yakov to make Marfa's coffin before her death (255). Chekhov shows that some versions of Christianity have very similar restrictions, noting the various Saint's days that keep Yakov from working. To the reader, the premature making of the coffin is morally uncomfortable; we would expect that Yakov could break the rules that prevent him from working, given the special circumstances. Yakov places strict adherence to religious laws before what the reader knows to be culturally acceptable, echoing the stereotype that Jewish law is being overly rigid, old-fashioned, and often culturally inappropriate. Chekhov challenges the reader in another way here as well. The first three days Yakov refuses to work make sense in light of Christian theology, but his desire to avoid work on Monday seems to be no more than a superstition. By placing this superstition alongside accepted religious traditions, Chekhov asks the reader to question the ways she determines the difference between the two.

Yakov also uses the self-deprecating humor common in eastern European Jewish communities. When he pleads with Marfa's doctor, Yakov says "and we're heartily grateful for your agreeableness, but permit me the expression—every insect wants to live" (256). Even as Jews were called insects or vermin, they still had a basic desire to live.[4] Here, Yakov's wittily turns this anti-Semitic slur against the Doctor. His dry sense of humor subverts the

doctor's derogatory language, paralleling the style of the wise men of Chelm.[5]

Yakov exemplifies many of the stereotypes about the way a Jew thinks and acts upon his beliefs. He possesses all of the internal characteristics of a stereotypical Jew; though he may not look like Shylock, he thinks like him. In contrast, Rothschild physically resembles a stereotypical Jew but lacks the internal "Jewish" characteristics seen in Yakov. Chekhov describes Rothschild as "a skinny red-headed Jew with a whole network of red and blue veins on his face" (254). Rothschild prefigures the kind of lanky, green-faced Jew in Chagall's "The Fiddler". Later in the story, Yakov uses similar language to describe Rothchild, "Yakov found it disgusting that the Jew was out of breath... And it was repulsive to look at his green frock coat with its dark patches and at his whole fragile, delicate figure" (258). Even as Rothschild's ragged frock coat conjures up an image of the "wandering Jews," he shares a name with one of Britain's richest bankers. His name does not represent his actual position in society, just as Jewish stereotypes are inaccurate. Rothchild is a haphazard compilation of images of what Jews look like to the outside world; he is both ragged and named after a banking tycoon. The external labels Checkhov seems to attach to Rothchild do not match Checkhov's more nuanced description of Rothchild's true character.

Rothschild's speech is also stereotypical. "Mister Shapovalov is marrying his daughter to a good mench. And oi, what a rich wedding it's going to be!" (261). His Yiddish-sprinkled diction puts Rothschild firmly in a cannon of outwardly stereotypical literary characters. Even the way he speaks to others in the outside world is distinctly "Jewish". Rothchild not only looks like Shylock or Fagin; he shares their verbal tics. Thus, Rothschild personifies the external stereotype of a Jew.

The fact that the we see so much of this stereotypical imagery through Yakov's eyes shows us that Chekhov is not simply having the Jew and Russian switch places in order to undercut prejudices against Jews. Rather, Chekhov is asking us to consider the ways in which Rothschild and Yakov interact and the differences between the outward, visible stereotypes and the inward, ideological ones.

Chekhov shows that both Rothschild and Yakov are capable of compassion and make progress toward a deeper, more empathetic understanding of one another. Rothschild does this through his understanding of Yakov's deeply felt music. "The frightened puzzled look on his face gradually changed to a mournful and suffering one, he rolled up his eyes as if experiencing some painful ecstasy and said: 'Weh-h-h!...' And tears flowed slowly down his cheeks and dripped onto the green frock coat" (261). Even though Yakov and Rothschild live in different communities, Rothschild is able to understand the existential pain expressed in Yakov's music. Thus, Rothschild does have a deeper spiritual dimension that transcends his stereotypical physique. His tears mark his frock coat, complicating the stereotypical image.

Yakov's path to redemption is more complex. His moral depravity seems to

obscure any potential expression of the pain he has experienced in his life. He does not even allow himself to remember his daughter. Yet, the combination of Marfa's joyful look as she dies and Rothschild's pain after he is bitten by a dog are enough to shock Yakov out of his moral and emotional stagnation, leading him to a classic existential dilemma. Yakov thinks to himself, "Life was to a man's loss, but death was to his benefit. This reflection was, of course, correct, but all the same it was bitter and offensive, why was the world ordered so strangely that life, which is given man only once, goes by without any benefit" (260). Yakov's moral redemption comes from his newly-realized ability to experience and understand the pain that accompanies wondering if life is indeed worth living. The fact that he reaches this conclusion because of his observation of Marfa's emotional state proves Yakov is emotionally broken but not emotionally empty. Though his logic appears vacuous, the conclusion it yields is rich. That said, he is unwilling, or perhaps unable to articulate this emotional conclusion; instead of words, Yakov uses a combination of deeds and music to express his emotional change. When he reaches out to Rothchild, Yakov proves he is capable of some gesture of kindness. This does not mean, however, that his motives are entirely pure. He still views material objects as people; his violin will be "orphaned" after his death (260). Still, his understanding of existential pain means that he is able to care for his violin and develop a deep enough sense of generosity to share that material wealth with Rothschild. The violin then, represents not only Yakov's own emotional shift, but acts as a sort of vehicle for emotional expression in Rothchild's hands. By making both Rothchild and Yakov musicians, Chekhov allows them to share an emotional vocabulary, even though they do not share a linguistic one.

Chekhov argues that the person who looks like a stereotype and the person who thinks like one are capable of empathetic connection with each other. Through this connection, the characters complicate the generalizations; after they reach out to each other, neither character is accurately represented by his stereotype. Rather, they are people whose emotional lives, transcend and invalidate their stereotypical images. By breaking the stereotype into its internal and external parts, Chekov shows that the interaction between these two stereotypical representations of the Jew yields two people who are not at all stereotypical.

References

1 *Pirke Avot: Ethics of the Fathers*. Chabbad, n.d. Web. 3 Nov. 2010. <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2165/jewish/Chapter-One.htm>. This text, which consists of a series of short aphorisms from the Rabbis, is the ethical tractate of the Talmud.

2 The suspicion that Jews ran a secret financial network in Europe developed in the late 18th century.

3 Beginning in 1791, Jews in Russia were restricted to living in the Pale of Settlement. In the Pale, Jews were prohibited from working in agriculture, and worked only as commercial merchants. The previously sizeable middle class became severely impoverished once they were prohibited from living and working in major urban centers. In on the places in Western Europe, from Germany to Venice, Jews lived confined in walled ghettos, until a gradual "emancipation" at the end of the 18th century. For most Jews, baptism was the main route out the ghetto. Thus, those Jews who chose to continue to live in these impoverished communities, were said to do so on their own volition.

4 The stereotype of Jews as "insects" or "vermin" arises first in Martin Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies.* Similar language was used from pre-modern times well into the 19th century, including in Karl Marx's *On the Jewish Question.*

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5 The "Wise Men of Chelm" are prominent figures in a series of Jewish folktales, published most famously by Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. The so-